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UNCLAS LJUBLJANA 000726

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [EU](#) [SI](#)

SUBJECT: SLOVENIA: GoS APPROVES POTOČNIK'S EU COMMISSIONER  
NOMINATION

REF: A. LJUBLJANA 90

[1](#)B. (03) LJUBLJANA 1251

Sensitive but Unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY. On 29 July, the GoS approved Janez Potočnik's nomination to serve as Slovenia's Commissioner in the EU. Potočnik has had great experience within the EU, having served as Slovenia's top accession negotiator and interim Commissioner. He is independent and can be considered a friend of the USG. END SUMMARY.

#### POTOČNIK'S APPOINTMENT APPROVED

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[1](#)2. (U) On 29 July, the GoS approved Janez Potočnik's nomination to serve as Slovenia's Commissioner in the EU. Since Parliament recently approved Potočnik as Interim Commissioner for the period of Slovenia's 01 May accession until 01 November, GoS stated that there would be no need for another confirmation vote.

#### POTOČNIK'S PRIORITIES AND INDEPENDENCE

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[1](#)3. (U) When speaking to the press after the GoS nominated him, Potočnik stated he would do his work on the Commission in an "open, consistent, and independent way." He elaborated by saying that although coming from Slovenia "will undoubtedly affect my thoughts and actions ... I will be responsible for broader European interests, which will have advantage over national or regional ones." He did not state what Commissioner slot he wanted, although the GoS has stated its desire for either the Enlargement, Regional Development, or Budget posts. Potočnik stated for the press that his biggest objectives would be to ensure the success of EU enlargement and to bring the Commission and its work "closer to its citizens."

#### OPPOSITION AGAINST POTOČNIK

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[1](#)4. (U) The opposition parties in the National Assembly approved of Potočnik when he was put forward as interim Commissioner after EU accession. During the European Parliamentary election campaign in June, however, Potočnik appeared at a rally for the governing coalition Liberal Democrats (LDS). Although Potočnik has publicly stated that he is not a member of LDS and will remain strongly independent, the opposition Social Democrats (SDS) has challenged his nomination this time around. SDS' main criticism is that LDS has been making long term appointments while ignoring the traditional Slovenian method of consensus building for important decisions, and Potočnik's appointment is the highest profile example. SDS Party leader Janez Jansa stated that making such appointments are "an assault on taxpayers" that could top 100 million SIT (approx 500,000 USD) if those appointed are removed from office. [NOTE: If someone is removed from an appointed post, he is still entitled to the full salary until he gets a new job with comparable pay. END NOTE.] The opposition Slovenian People's Party (SLS) has echoed SDS' criticisms, while the opposition National Party (SNS), an extreme right wing party, has taken its criticism of Potočnik in a different direction. SNS has criticized Potočnik's public support of Croatia's accession to the EU.

#### POTOČNIK'S BIOGRAPHY

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[1](#)5. (SBU) Janez Potočnik, born in 1958, headed the Slovenian Negotiation Team for Accession from 1998 until accession, and directed the Government Office for European Affairs for six months in 2000. In January 2002, he was appointed Minister without Portfolio for European Affairs, a post he relinquished upon becoming Slovenia's EU Commissioner after the 01 May accession. Potočnik's background is in economics, an area in which he holds a PhD from the University of Ljubljana. He was a member of the

task force charged with bringing Slovenian economic and agricultural policies in line with EU norms, and also headed the Institute of Macroeconomic Development of the Republic of Slovenia from 1994 until 2001. Potocnik participated in the Voluntary Visitor Program in January 2004, and was very enthusiastic about the program (ref: A and B).

COMMENT

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16. (SBU) The fact that no opposition parties objected to Potocnik's nomination earlier this year as interim Commissioner lends credence to the idea that current objections can be attributed to electioneering ahead of the 03 October national elections. SDS seems to be using Potocnik's single appearance at an LDS rally as a ploy to get into the news and to highlight its differences with LDS. Potocnik is one of the main targets of SDS, but they have also criticized LDS for making other long-term appointments without first finding consensus. Post believes that SNS and SLS are also using Potocnik's appointment to highlight their differences with LDS. Despite opposition statements to the contrary, Post believes that Potocnik remains stoutly independent, and his comments to the press have strengthened this view.

17. (SBU) Potocnik does not have a voting record on Trans-Atlantic relations, but from our meetings and dealings with him, Post characterizes him as a pragmatist and a genuine friend of the US. He supports Turkey's accession to the EU, and he is someone we could call up and ask for help from within the EU context. Post believes that US interlocutors will find him articulate, rational, intelligent and friendly. END COMMENT.

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